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## **Introductory paper: Special Issue on Rapport and Collusion in Feminist Research**

**Thinking critically about rapport and collusion in feminist research: relationships, contexts and ethical practice.**

**Georgia Philip and Linda Bell**

### **Introduction**

In this WSIF Special Issue on rapport and collusion in feminist research, members of the Women's Workshop on Qualitative/ Household Research (the 'Women's Workshop') present papers that exemplify their recent research and connections with Workshop themes that have been developed by the group over many years. This Workshop has a nearly 30 year track record of collaborative writing and publication; it has provided women, at all stages of their academic career, with a 'protective enclave' (see Hazel Wright and colleagues, this issue) for sharing research interests and developing ideas. The Workshop was established after a small group of women first met at a BSA PhD summer school in the late 1980s. After continuing to meet informally for several years, the group began to develop collaborative writing projects, the first of which was a Special Issue for the *Women's Studies International Forum*, published in 1995, focused on 'Women in families and households'. This was followed in 1998 by a first edited collection from members of the Workshop, entitled: *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: public knowledge and private lives* (Ribbens and Edwards (Eds.), 1998). Further co-edited and co-authored publications have been produced and these include two editions of *Ethics in Qualitative Research* (Mauthner et al (eds.) 2002 and Miller et al (eds.) 2012) and two other edited collections, *Power, Knowledge and the Academy* (Gillies and Lucey (Eds.), 2007) and *Critical Approaches to Care* (Rogers and Weller (Eds.), 2013). Whilst membership is dynamic, the group continues to provide a 'care-full' space (Chrissie Rogers, this issue) for feminist qualitative research, productive disagreement and constructive collaboration. A collective point of departure for the development of this special issue was the recognition that such spaces have never been more needed within an increasingly neo-liberal academy (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010; Res Sisters 2016).

Taken together, the papers in this special issue offer points of engagement with a number of both longstanding and contemporary issues in feminist research. The collection explores the concepts of rapport and collusion in specific research settings, but also by using the broader perspective of positionality: considering the impact of gender, class and ethnicity on the doing and writing of research. This issue also offers important discussions of ethics in

qualitative research; particularly those which concern sensitive aspects of personal relationships. One overall argument made here is that procedural or institutional ethics are rarely enough for, or are out of step with, the dynamics of ethical issues when working in the field. The impact of emotionally sensitive research on the researcher, as well as the participant is one example explored by a number of these authors. Related to this, the papers also seek to highlight the importance of 'feeling' and reciprocity in qualitative research; both in terms of relationships with research participants, and with academic colleagues. The general arguments being made here are the need to acknowledge the 'messy' boundaries of research relationships, and to challenge binary thinking around the positions of a detached versus an 'involved' researcher. In this way, the collection contributes to the broader debate about the relevance of an ethics of care (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993) particularly for qualitative, feminist research and also to current concerns over the creep of neo-liberalism into the academy (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). A number of the papers speak to this concern, either in relation to specific experiences of qualitative researchers, or to make a broader argument about the obscuring of ongoing gender inequality in institutions. Finally, this special issue constitutes a demonstration of a number of innovative and insightful qualitative approaches to knowledge production, including: forms of auto-ethnography, narrative analysis, reflexivity, critical research, qualitative longitudinal work and applied social research. Using concrete examples of ethical challenges and unsettling encounters from a range of qualitative projects, the collection explores the emotional labour of knowledge relations, and specifically, the specific concepts of rapport and collusion.

### **Rapport, collusion and feminist methodology:**

Workshop members contributing to this special issue chose to explore these two concepts, wishing to argue that there is a profound and long established link between feminist epistemological and methodological concerns and the specific idea of the research relationship. Feminist researchers have demonstrated a particular 'sensitivity' (see Newton, this issue) to the complex dimensions of the researcher-participant relationship, and a commitment to reflexivity as part of the discipline of doing research, especially about women's lives and lived experiences. The concept of reflexivity is itself subject to critique (Skeggs 2002) but nonetheless feminist academics remain at the forefront of providing 'unsettling', honest accounts of research practice, opening up the secrecies and silences to wider dissemination and debate (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Hoggart, this issue; Ryan-Flood & Gill 2010). Feminist researchers have maintained a critical focus on the power relations involved in knowledge production; both in and around the doing of research, but also in the wider contexts of institutions and the academy. The collection of papers

presented here continues that tradition; offering insight and careful consideration of relationships with different kinds of participants, with funders, research partners, colleagues and institutions (see in particular Horsley, Edwards & Gillies' discussion of the 'critically prepared').

As Duncombe and Jessop (2002; 2012) suggested in previous Workshop publications, following Oakley's early paper on interviewing women (Oakley, 1981) many feminists used the notion of 'rapport' to emphasise the value of their position as 'insider researchers': attempting above all to somehow minimize the distance between themselves and those with whom they were researching. However, as Duncombe and Jessop point out, 'doing rapport', and its increasing professionalization (or 'commodification'), has led to suggestions that the interviewer needs to *manage* every aspect of research encounters (for example in some cases reframing interviews as 'quasi-therapeutic') or to 'fake friendship'. In addition, equating 'rapport' with 'trust' can be seen to demonstrate 'a disturbing ethical naivety' (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012:110); furthermore, various aspects of 'collusion' may then emerge through research practice. Building on such feminist theoretical debates, the authors in this special issue explore, more specifically, the pressures and tensions to collude:

- In research relationships with respondents, when 'faking friendship' (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002; 2012) or what has been termed 'deceptive candour' (Hughes, 1989);
- Within academic systems & processes including research funding applications, impact reports or for research assessment exercise such as the REF;
- In relationships with other professionals or practitioners, in partnerships with organisations or with service users.

Our collective position is that the dilemmas and complexities around how these ideas play out in practice are also too often left out of the processes of the writing and sharing of research, and that this may risk 'hidden injuries' (Gill, 2010) to participants and researchers alike. Overall then, we are interested in the interconnected issues of 'rapport' and 'collusion' in a context of renewed feminist epistemological debates around ethics, agency and coercion (Madhok, Phillips and Wilson, 2013). Having set out our broader concerns and intentions, we now offer a brief overview of these papers organised under three key headings, each representing a common theme within the special issue.

### **What counts as collusion and how does it relate to notions of rapport?**

The papers in this special issue explore questions such as 'what does collusion look like'; 'when is collusion acceptable or productive and when is it not'? The authors reflect on the kinds of personal, methodological or institutional agendas researchers may feel comfortable or uncomfortable about resisting, and where the ethical 'bottom line' in research may be, both in the academy and outside (Gillies & Lucey, 2007). A number of authors engage, more specifically, with the work of Duncombe & Jessop (2012) on the emotional labour of knowledge relations. For example, both *Emily Falconer* and *Tina Miller* address how feminist researchers may identify issues of collusion and rapport and how these relate to concrete or micro aspects of the research interview. *Tina* reflects on the ways researchers can and do co-construct interview accounts. She considers the creation of spaces and endurance of silences, or supportive comments that may be made to invite and allow disclosures, asking: "Do 'permissions' to voice difficult, challenging experiences amount to collusion or just good, effective interviewing technique?". She also raises the question of where does rapport begin and end; highlighting how encounters around the research interview, particularly in the context of qualitative longitudinal research, may blur the boundaries of how the research relationship is defined and understood.

*Emily Falconer* focuses on the emotional aspects of research relationships, suggesting that 'affective moments of collusion' are often present in feminist research. Drawing on two examples of 'immersive fieldwork', *Emily* explores ways in which the experience of emotions, and acts of care, confound and unsettle the research encounter and provoke important questions about who may be colluding with whom and for what purpose. Contextualising these seemingly personal encounters within a wider systematic framework of the early career researcher, *Emily* also offers a critique of the increasingly neo-liberal climate of academia.

*Jaya Gajparia* and *Victoria Newton* offer a grounded exploration of both the emotional impact of research (on the researcher) and the messy complexity of ethics 'in the field'. Through her work on women's lived experiences of gender and poverty in Mumbai, India, *Jaya* considers debates on the strategic versus 'authentic' research relationships. She develops her idea of 'capitalising on rapport' as a way of capturing the feelings of unease or guilt that she experienced in the tension between her own feminist, ethical position and the pressure to collude with institutional expectations of completing research quickly and 'efficiently'. *Victoria* seeks to reveal the ethical complexity and emotional impact of conducting sensitive research (on young women's experiences of abortion). Highlighting the different and potentially conflicting needs and interests of the participant and researcher, *Victoria* discusses issues of informed consent, the implications of the research interview

being re-framed as quasi-therapeutic, and the impact of this on both the participant and the (early career) researcher. Like Jaya, Victoria also frames her discussion with a broader consideration of the tensions between “the need of the researcher to ‘get the job done’ and generate meaningful, rich data, and the need to prioritise participant and researcher wellbeing”. Taken together then, these papers employ the concepts of collusion and rapport to shed light on the ambiguous boundaries of research relationships and also to argue the need for critical reflection and openness about this aspect of research. Yet, as the next common thread in our special issue illustrates, the spaces for talking about such issues are arguably limited and challenging.

### **Contexts for collusion and/or collaboration**

Other contributors to this special issue have focused more explicitly on the contexts in which research occurs and implications of these for the different stages or processes of knowledge production. Examples include: being an early career researcher; doing applied social research in the field of sexual health; doing critical research with policy makers and practitioners; and navigating and/or resisting the demands of a ‘masculinist, ‘care-less’ or neo-liberal academy.

As indicated above, *Emily Falconer*, *Jaya Gajparia* and *Victoria Newton*, situate their reflections on rapport and collusion within the broader context of being early career researchers. Their argument here, is that it is precisely this context, of highly competitive, high-pressured and insecure employment, which produces troubling insights about how to conduct ethical, feminist research, but does little to address or ameliorate these (Res Sisters, 2016). Thus Victoria suggests that whilst “there may be informal opportunities to discuss fieldwork concerns within research teams, often no specific emotional support system is built into studies”.

*Lesley Hoggart* discusses the ethical challenges of mediating different research agendas when working in partnership with policy makers and practitioners. Drawing on two applied social research projects in the field of sexual health, Lesley considers the ways that both studies “involved contradictions, uncertainties and potential for collusions”, highlighting the particular tensions that arise from projects that are “circumscribed by the research aims of the funders, and the policy framework”. Lesley goes further to explore the challenges for feminist researchers in particular and argues that “feminist reflexivity at each stage of the research process should permit us to claim partial knowledge. This is arguably infinitely better than making no knowledge claims at all, or making unrealistic positivist claims to objectivity and truth”.

The paper by *Nicola Horsley, Ros Edwards and Val Gillies* also considers the methodological and ethical challenges of working with policy makers and practitioners, but this time in the context of doing critical research. Through their account of ‘conflicted’ research relationships in their project on the current dominance of neuroscience in early intervention programmes related to parenting, these authors identify particular dilemmas for the critical researcher. Contrasting their experiences of interviewing practitioners and policy makers committed to the neuroscience discourse, Nicola, Ros and Val explore the different responses and strategies adopted by researchers and participants, and the “unspoken discord between the stance of the critical interviewer and the uncritical interviewee”. Their overall argument is for the importance of such discomfiting research to social science and social policy, and suggest that “our unsettling experiences are a reminder of the value of research that reveals that which is not settled” in the public policy arena.

*Chrissie Rogers*, and joint authors *Hazel Wright, Linda Cooper and Paulette Luff* explore, in different ways, women’s working relationships in higher education. *Chrissie* does this through her development of feminist moral philosophical ideas on care ethics, using the specific concept of ‘care-less space’. Drawing on an analysis of narratives from working class women academics, *Chrissie* presents a discussion of, again, discomfiting feelings of complicity, ‘faked’ collaboration, and mistrust experienced within the university. She suggests that ‘carelessness in the academy’ can create and reproduce animosity; this is damaging to knowledge production and intellectual pursuits as well as to the identity and wellbeing of female academics. *Hazel, Linda and Paulette* also examine the context of higher education, but their focus is on the teaching of Early Years Education. Their paper uses a process of AAA/I (Asynchronous Associative Auto/Inquiry) to explore their own working practices to “wo(manage) the masculinist environment of the university” and ameliorate this system for both their students and themselves. In this context they argue they experience particular practical and ethical dilemmas around collusion, or compliance, and resistance; treading a difficult path between working within a system they are ambivalent to, and pushing for radical change. Both of these papers locate their discussion in the broader context of the encroachment of the neo-liberal state into education, and see this as deeply problematic. They also make a connection between neo-liberalism and continuing gender inequalities in education, and seek to use their papers to make these visible and open to critique.

**Working ‘in the margins’ (Ribbens & Edwards 1998); strategies for collaboration and constructive collusion in feminist research:**

Alongside the tracing of complex research relationships and the interrogation of different contexts in which these are produced, the authors in this special issue also seek to respond to the specific ethical challenges they identify. A recurring general argument being made is, the limitation of relying solely on formal, or procedural ethics, and that any such reliance may indeed amount to a form of collusion which is harmful to participants and researchers alike. Within their respective papers each author also offers ideas, or makes a call for, strategies (practical and/or ethical) for attending to the challenges of conducting feminist qualitative research in a contemporary academic, socio-economic and political climate. *Chrissie Rogers* for example, discusses the relevance of developing care-full spaces and care-full pedagogy within higher education, using a framework developed by Herring (2013). She argues that careless spaces can be pervasive in higher education contexts, where power could be a very positive source of care-fullness. However, power is more often used “in a way that limits agency, and rather than promoting an interdependence (a freedom from dependence), it maintains dependence and limits choices in a care-less manner”.

*Hazel, Linda and Paulette* offer strategies in their paper for deflecting or minimising the ‘excesses’ of the (masculinist/neo-liberal) higher education system for students and for making these processes bearable for each other. Individually they may feel a need to “favour work-life balance over career progression”; however “collectively, we recognise that our career decisions are affected by the changing educational environment” which includes amongst other things repositioning students as ‘customers’.

*Tina* and *Victoria* are both interested in ethical practice outside and beyond the actual research interview. *Tina* for example stresses the importance of reflexivity in these processes: “the extending trajectory of qualitative interview research (both before and following the recorded interview) requires researchers to be able to practice reflexively in an increasingly complex terrain”. Both these researchers, along with *Emily Falconer*, further suggest the importance of recognizing the emotional impact(s) as well as reciprocity in research relationships. For Emily “moments of emotional labour and rapport are, in fact, moments of great connection, which in turn lead to complex *processes* of collusion”. These research complexities go well beyond the parameters of formalised ethics requirements and need researchers to exercise considerable reflexivity when conducting research practices ‘ethically’. *Jaya, Victoria* and *Emily* all stress the need to improve job security in higher education and argue for better, more responsive support and training for early career researchers in dealing with these kinds of processes.

Moving beyond higher education contexts, *Lesley* and *Nicola, Ros* and *Val* are also interested in the need for greater reflexivity and openness around collaboration with partners



who may have different or conflicting/competing) agendas from their own. They suggest that for professionals or policy makers who become research partners, and whose own ethical practices include ‘empowering’ participants (such as users of their services) , this “positioning of participants has tended to eclipse consideration of researchers’ experiences”. In these circumstances, researchers must be able to “simultaneously navigate, resist and use the discourse they critique”.

## **Conclusion:**

In this Special Issue, all the papers we have introduced are attempting to scrutinise research relationships and to interrogate the longstanding and interconnected concepts we have identified as *rapport* and *collusion*. Whilst considering the ‘emotional labour of knowledge relations’, these authors also discuss the relevance of reflexivity and positionality to their feminist research and seek to demonstrate how such issues are embedded within their research practices. They talk us through the research contexts in which collaboration may become conflicted, with open, honest and reflective accounts of their work. They all discuss in their different ways how these research processes may unsettle standard notions of rapport, and/or involve either inevitable or unwelcome collusion. Finally, and resonating with other contemporary feminist academics, these authors argue the urgent and increasing need for spaces of “inclusivity, solidarity and care” within the academy and beyond (Res Sisters 2016). As co-editors of this special issue we feel that by these means, our collection of papers contributes positively to ongoing debates and practical suggestions for developing future feminist research, as well as encouraging constructive research collaboration and ethical research practice more widely.

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